

The Best Way To Keep Romance Alive

By Jennifer Saranow. Wall Street Journal [New York, N.Y] 18 Nov 2002: .6.

Abstract

One new entrant is unashamed about what it's for: ScoreBrowniePoints.com. The site, launched in September, is geared toward men in dating relationships, helping them send gifts above and beyond those required for the major holidays. For \$47 every two months, ScoreBrowniePoints sends each subscriber a gift he can wrap and send to his romantic partner. The first was a handmade chocolate daisy bouquet. Future gifts, the site's founder says, will include handmade white chocolates and small aluminum pieces, called "wish stones," inscribed with words of love, like "hope" and "happiness." In another sign of how fast this market is growing, Mr. [Dan Devey] for several months has served as the dating editor at Google Inc., the Mountain View, Calif., search engine, helping it to expand its directory of dating sites. Among his favorites: DatingAgain101.com, a site providing advice on love and romance the second time around; and the dating section of About.com, a portal owned by New York-based Primedia Inc. The latter, Mr. Devey says, is "a great starting place for exploring various aspects of dating." There you'll find advice on a range of topics, from age differences and interracial relationships to Internet dating, long-distance romances and "safety" -- which includes such subtopics as avoiding losers and determining honesty. Citysearch has teamed up with online-dating giant Match.com, another Ticketmaster company, to publish romance guides for 16 cities based on an analysis of Match.com profiles and user surveys. The guides, available on Citysearch's "personals" tab, recommend dating itineraries for various regions. For a low-key date in Los Angeles, for example, the guide suggests roller-skating at World on Wheels, followed by a chili cheese dog at Pink's. In Atlanta, try people watching at Piedmont Park.

Full Text

SO YOU'VE used an Internet dating service to find the love of your life and have even conducted some of the courtship via e-mail and online chat rooms.

Is it time to call it quits? With the Web, I mean, not the relationship.

Not a chance. The Net is just as useful in keeping the flame of romance alive as it is in striking the initial spark. Sites for the lovestruck offer unusual date tips, romantic online cards and gift ideas, all in addition to the usual online flower shops and sites for choosing dinner reservations and romantic getaways.

"After a few months or years, the romance has faded in most relationships," says Michael Webb, an author and syndicated online columnist who writes about romance from Cary, N.C. "Either we've run out of ideas or simply out of gas. The Web is a perfect place to turn to for ideas and inspiration for fanning the flames of romance. There are great all-encompassing sites on everything you would ever want to know."

One new entrant is unashamed about what it's for: ScoreBrowniePoints.com. The site, launched in September, is geared toward men in dating relationships, helping them send gifts above and beyond those required for the major holidays. For \$47 every two months, ScoreBrowniePoints sends each subscriber a gift he can wrap and send to his romantic partner. The first was a handmade chocolate daisy bouquet. Future gifts, the site's founder says, will include handmade white chocolates and small aluminum pieces, called "wish stones," inscribed with words of love, like "hope" and "happiness."

One happy customer is Mike Banks Valentine -- who insists that's his real name. Mr. Valentine, a 46-year-old Web marketer from Thousand Oaks, Calif., says the service makes it a snap to send regular presents to his fiancée, Tamara Ralston, a 39-year-old administrative accountant 50 miles away in Long Beach, Calif. The two met through an online dating site in July. "Before, I had to go to a store, search for gifts, wrap them and send them," Mr. Valentine says. ScoreBrowniePoints "totally streamlines the process and handles everything down to sending me the wrapping paper."

Ms. Ralston's reaction: "It helps him know how to woo," she laughs. She gives her fiancée credit for making the effort to go out and find the site and make the gift-giving happen. "Some guys need help," she says. "He's making a lot of points now."

The founder of ScoreBrowniePoints, 30-year-old Jodie Gastel, a work-at-home entrepreneur in Victoria, British Columbia, says about a year ago she saw a market opportunity for a Web service that helps people stay close and save time. Says Ms. Gastel, "Once you get into a routine of a relationship, most people -- women included -- don't remember to do the little things to remind their partner they think they're special."

She has only about 25 paying customers so far, but her free newsletter -- with tips on making women happy, and other information -- has roughly 500 subscribers. She says she gets the word out by advertising in online magazines and giving interviews -- more than 40 on the radio so far. For her gift ideas, she says she looks for things with "mass girlie appeal," like flowers and chocolates, spa kits and aromatherapy wraps -- sizeless items that stay away from sex, religion and politics.

Demand has grown steadily for Web businesses that provide romantic gifts and flowers. In February -- this market's hottest month, thanks to Valentine's Day -- flower and gift sites posted \$108 million in sales, compared with \$97.8 million a year earlier, according to comScore Networks Inc., an online research firm in Reston, Va. And, for the first quarter, sales jumped to \$216.5 million from \$169.4 million a year earlier.

"This is just one of those areas that is continuing to grow and obviously fulfills a demand," says Max Kalehoff, senior manager at comScore Media Metrix, a division of comScore Networks.

Not everyone is looking online for help in picking the special gift. Some can use assistance in figuring where to go on a date beyond the usual movie or dinner. Enter CoolestDates.com, a free site that provides hundreds of ideas for fun, original dates in 27 categories, including free, first and adventurous. The site attracted about 8,500 visitors in September, roughly double the number back in July.

"It seemed to me that too often dating ruts of 'dinner and a movie' or 'drinks and dancing' were commonplace," says the site's founder, Dan Devey, a 42-year-old manufacturing analyst from Canton, Mich. Mr. Devey claims that he went on 300 dates in high school alone, and resorted to dinner and a movie only three times.

Among his site's suggestions: eating dinner in an unusual location, like on a bridge; making sundaes with homemade ice cream; enjoying a hayride followed by apple cider; hiking in the early morning to a romantic campfire breakfast; or performing "service dates" such as visiting the elderly. New date ideas, often provided by visitors to the site, are posted each week.

In another sign of how fast this market is growing, Mr. Devey for several months has served as the dating editor at Google Inc., the Mountain View, Calif., search engine, helping it to expand its directory of dating sites. Among his favorites: DatingAgain101.com, a site providing advice on love and romance the second time around; and the dating section of About.com, a portal owned by New York-based Primedia Inc. The latter, Mr. Devey says, is "a great starting place for exploring various aspects of dating." There you'll find advice on a range of topics, from age differences and interracial relationships to Internet dating, long-distance romances and "safety" -- which includes such subtopics as avoiding losers and determining honesty.

Want to try one of Mr. Devey's date ideas but can't locate the nearest flea market or drive-in? Sherry Amatenstein, dating columnist for iVillage.com, a Web site devoted to women's issues, recommends Citysearch.com, a guide to local attractions for 128 cities world-wide. This service from Los Angeles-based Ticketmaster Inc. can be a rich source of tips. Its annual polls of users and editors select the best romantic restaurants (for New York, the French restaurant La Grenouille), the best place to kiss (at the Buckingham Fountain, if you're in Chicago) or best bar for a date (in Los Angeles, the Good Luck Bar).

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If you're dating someone who lives far away, Lorilyn Bailey, founder of Onlineromance.com, proposes going on a virtual date. It's "really not going out on a date, but you're pretending in the best way possible," she says. Ms. Bailey suggests visiting an art museum's Web site together, for example. Lots of online galleries can be found through the Art Museum Network, at AMN.org. The simple approach: Surf the Web while talking on the phone.

Or, for the ultimate in cyber-closeness, Ms. Bailey recommends a service like the Internet collaboration tool WebConference.com, which for \$40 a month will allow your cyberdate to see on his or her computer the programs and documents you're seeing on yours, and to interact with you in real time.

Ms. Bailey also urges couples not to ignore a time-honored custom: sending handwritten cards and love letters on important holidays. Still, in the Internet age no one needs to dispatch wax-sealed letters delivered by liveried servants. E-greetings, she says, are fine for everyday correspondence. Also consider sending a thank-you note or funny card by e-mail after a first date. "I think everybody likes to be remembered," she says, "and the Internet makes it very easy for you to do that."

AmericanGreetings.com is a good bet if you're willing to shell out a little cash. Its three sites typically receive nearly half of all visitors to e-card sites each month, according to comScore. Each AmericanGreetings site charges \$11.95 a year for an unlimited number of greetings. Subscribers can choose from thousands of e-cards and invitations, or create and print paper versions. At Bluemountain.com, one of the sites owned by Cleveland-based American Greetings Corp., members can create reminders to help them remember birthdays and other important dates. There are some free cards, too, if you choose not to subscribe.

For a larger selection of free cards, Ms. Bailey sends would-be correspondents to MyPostCards.com, a site with links to hundreds of greeting-card sites. Another service, PassionUp.com, changes its free cards daily and even offers help for those at a loss for words -- fill-in-the-blank love letters.

If that idea doesn't appeal, there's a verse option: e-mail poetry from a selection of classic -- and some not-so-classic -- poems at LovePoetry.com. Or, if you need to say you're sorry, check out an automatic apology generator at Karmafarm.com.

ComScore's Mr. Kalehoff advises that with e-cards you often get what you pay for. The quality of cards is generally better on the paying sites, he says, where the selection also is bigger. On some sites, the cards tend to represent one of two extremes: cutesy and sentimental, or racy.

While e-cards may not be appropriate for special occasions, e-gifts are. And some sites go to lengths to help you find exactly the right one. If you're the kind of spouse, for example, who gets credit for remembering to buy any anniversary present, imagine being able to come up with that traditionally correct something -- silk, say, on your 12th anniversary. Among other features, RedEnvelope.com, San Francisco, has a reference guide for traditional anniversary gifts and makes suggestions from pocket watches to diamond pendants.

FindGift.com is a free service that lists about 4,500 possible presents from 230 online stores. This site, owned by Registry Online Inc., Kennesaw, Ga., not only sorts the goods by year of anniversary, it organizes them by type of object, the occasion, the sentiment to be expressed, your relationship to the recipient and the recipient's age. The business makes money by charging the vendors for their listings.

For little everyday gifts, there's Romanceher.com, a Knoxville, Tenn., site that offers customized perfumes and puzzles among other little tokens of affection, including wish stones, which seem to be a staple at romantic gift sites.

Sometimes it seems impossible to find just the right thing. So you might consider another kind of gesture -- something of a nonmaterial nature. Check out TheRomantic.com, the site of the columnist Mr. Webb, which suggests ways to show your affection in more than 60 kinds of circumstances, such as when your loved one is searching for a job, sick, or just feeling blue.

Of course, the best Web tip of all about romance might be this one from Ms. Amatenstein, the iVillage dating columnist: "Take it offline." Things done with and for one another "online should not be the crux of the relationship," she says. "There's something to be said for face to face. Do you really want virtual kissing?"

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